

MAHĪRĀVAṆA AND THE WOMB DEMON

In the later *Rāmāyaṇa* literature the figure of Rāvaṇa was complemented by other demons, usually relatives, who bear the same name as he. These include Śataskandha Rāvaṇa, Sahasraskandha Rāvaṇa, Lakṣa-skandha Rāvaṇa and Mahīrāvaṇa. The last of these figures is perhaps best known through the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kṛttibāsa. Sixty years ago in *The Bengali Ramayanas* D.C. Sen wrote that the Mahīrāvaṇa tale is made up of «indigenous» (i.e. Bengali) elements, is «a folktale pure and simple» and is in spirit «śākta and Tantric»¹. The Mahīrāvaṇa story, as it appears in Kṛttibāsa, is a simple one; after Lakṣmaṇa kills Indrajit, the demon king is advised by his mother Nikaṣā to enlist the aid of another son, Mahīrāvaṇa, who rules a kingdom in the underworld. Mahīrāvaṇa appears, learns of his father Rāvaṇa's predicament, and vows to rid him of his enemy Rāma. When Rāma's allies learn of this new danger, they take measures to protect him: Hanumān assumes his *viśāla rūpa*, giant shape, and surrounds the monkey camp with his huge tail. Vibhīṣaṇa instructs him to admit no one into the camp without permission. Nevertheless, Mahīrāvaṇa, after a few unsuccessful impersonations, takes the form of Vibhīṣaṇa, gains admittance, puts everyone to sleep with a magic spell and carries off Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to his underworld kingdom and imprisons them there. When the apes wake up the next morning, they find that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have been kidnapped and send Hanumān to search for them. Hanumān discovers a tunnel leading to the underworld and makes his way there. While sitting on a tree in his monkey shape he overhears a conversation between two of the demon king's subjects about the two humans, whom Mahīrāvaṇa intends to sacrifice to the goddess Kālī the next day. Assuming the body of a fly Hanumān visits Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in their cell and assures them of rescue; he then goes to the temple in his real form and intro-

1. Calcutta, 1920, pp. 252-54.

duces himself to the goddess. Kālī is very cooperative and devises a plan to save the lives of the two heroes: when Mahīrāvaṇa brings Rāma into the temple and asks him to prostrate himself before the image, she tells Hanumān, Rāma is to tell the demon that as he is the son of a king, he does not know how to bow. Then, when Mahīrāvaṇa demonstrates to him how to do so, Hanumān is to leap from behind the image, seize the sacrificial sword and strike off the demon's head. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are brought to the temple on the following day, all goes according to Kālī's plan and Mahīrāvaṇa is decapitated. His pregnant queen, however, hears the commotion at the temple and attacks Hanumān when she learns of her husband's death. During their struggle Hanumān kicks her in the stomach and she gives birth to a son, Ahirāvaṇa, who attacks Hanumān in his turn. Ahirāvaṇa grapples with Hanumān and after a long and closely fought wrestling bout, Hanumān manages to throw down the demon, seize him by the feet and dash out his brains. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān return to the surface of the earth and the *Rāmāyaṇa* story continues along more conventional lines.

Since Sen's day it has been pointed out that the Mahīrāvaṇa tale is familiar throughout and beyond India; it is found in Sanskrit, Assamese, Oriya, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu as well as in Thai, Laotian and Malay. Here we will concern ourselves primarily with the variants of the story current in eastern India, that is, with the variants found in Bengali, Oriya and Assamese. In Bengali Kṛttibāsa's successors Śaṅkara Kabicandra, Jagadrāma and Dāśarathi Rāy include the episode in their Rāma poems. In Oriya it can be found in the *Dakṣiṇī Rāmāyaṇa*², the *Bicitra Rāmāyaṇa* of Biśvanātha Khuṇṭiā, the *Śrīrāmalīlā* of Bikrama Narendra and the *Nala Carita*³ of Śiśu Iśvara Dāsa. In Assamese the story appears in a single poem, the *Mahīrāvaṇa Caritra āru Vetālacaṇḍīra Upākhyāna* of Candra Bhārati⁴. The Assamese version follows the lines of the tale as in Kṛttibāsa but it is told with more elaboration and skill. In it Ahirāvaṇa is simply called *garbhāsura*, the womb demon, and considerable attention is given to his struggle with Hanumān. Candra Bhārati and Kṛttibāsa obviously took their materials from the same or a very similar source.

2. This huge work attributed to the greatest of the Oriya *Rāmāyaṇa* poets, Ba-larāma Dāsa, has been published under the title of *Dāṇḍī Rāmāyaṇa* (collected by T. CAUDHURI and B. BISSA, Dharmagrantha Stores, Cuttack, n.d.). It is obviously the work of later hands and in it a bewildering variety of Rāma material finds a place. Here Mahīrāvaṇa imprisons Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān and Suśeṇa in his city of Sulaṅkā and is eventually slain in battle by Lakṣmaṇa. It differs radically from other versions of the tale and is most likely a poetic innovation.

3. This is a late *śleṣa* poem which tells the stories of Rāma and Nala simultaneously. It has not been used here.

4. It was believed that this work was by the Vaiṣṇava reformer Ananta Kandalī, one of whose epithets was Candra Bhārati. The character of the poems, however, makes this extremely unlikely. See S. N. SHARMA, *Epics and Purāṇas in Early Assamese Literature*, Gauhati, 1972, p. 53.

The Oriya poets, however, give a different version of the story. In these versions Mahīrāvaṇa is the grandson of Rāvaṇa⁵. Biśvanātha Khunṭiā and Bikrama Narendra tell the story as in Kṛttibāsa and Candra Bhārati up to the point when Hanumān enters the tunnel leading to the underworld, then they diverge, for here the Oriya poets tell us, Hanumān encounters a being named Makaradhvaṇa who is guarding the entrance to the underworld. Makaradhvaṇa challenges Hanumān, the two fight and Hanumān is astonished to find that his opponent's strength is equal to his own. Eventually Makaradhvaṇa reveals that he is the son of Hanumān, the two embrace, and Hanumān continues on his way. He enters the temple of the goddess hidden in a flower basket in the form of an insect, displaces the goddess and kills Mahīrāvaṇa. The womb demon is not mentioned. Mahīrāvaṇa's underworld kingdom is given to Makaradhvaṇa and the heroes return to the siege of Laṅkā⁶. When we look to the Sanskrit versions of the tale we see that the son of Hanumān appears in them as well. The Mahīrāvaṇa episode can be found in the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* and is treated independently in the *Mairāvaṇa-carita*. According to the first there are two demons, Mairāvaṇa and Airāvaṇa, who burrow their way into Rāma's camp from the underworld and carry off the two brothers through the air on the slab of rock on which they are sleeping. When Hanumān encounters Makaradhvaṇa he is given the following account of his paternity:

*laṅkāddāhaṃ purā kṛtvā sāgare sītalaṃ kṛtaṃ
yadā pucchaṃ mārutinā tadā taddhūmapūritāt
kaṇṭhācchleṣmā bahis tyaktaḥ sāgare so'patat tadā
makaryā bhakṣitaḥ so'pi tasyāṃ jātaḥ suto'smy aham⁷*

After burning Laṅkā Māruti cooled his tail in the ocean, his lungs filled with smoke, some phlegm he spat out from his throat fell into the ocean. This was swallowed by a *makarī*, thus I was born in it and am his son.

Makaradhvaṇa goes on to explain that his mother was caught by a fisherman, she was presented to Mahīrāvaṇa and when he was discovered in her belly, the demon made him his watchman. This agrees with the Oriya accounts. Thereafter, however, the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* tells us that Hanumān goes in the temple of the goddess, assumes the form of

5. In the first Oriya *Rāmāyaṇa*, that of Baṇarāma Dāsa, Mahīrāvaṇa is the son of Indrajit and killed on the eleventh day of the battle. Later poets follow the precedent and make him Rāvaṇa's grandson.

6. In Bikrama Narendra (Dharmagrantha Stores, Cuttack, n.d.) when Sītā learns from Trijaṭā that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa have been kidnapped, she sheds two tears from which spring the goddesses Tārā and Tārīṇī. She sends them to the underworld to protect Rāma. Hanumān overhears Trijaṭā and thus learns his whereabouts. In Biśvanātha Hanumān simply overhears Trijaṭā. In both works the episode bears the signature of Bikrama Narendra.

7. *Ānandarāmāyaṇa*, ed. by Y. K. Dvivedi, Kasi, 1962, *Sārākāṇḍa* 11, 88-89.

the image and orders Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to be freed. The demons are then slain, not by Hanumān, but by the two brothers⁸. The *Mairāvaṇacarita* does not mention Airāvaṇa, but otherwise resembles the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* account⁹.

The figure of Makaradhvaja seems only to be found in the Mahīrāvaṇa tale. *Makara* is a vague term corresponding to « sea-monster », « dolphin », « shark » etc.; Zeiseniss translates *makarī* as *Krokodilweibchen*¹⁰. The name is also an epithet of Kāma, *makaraketu*, *makarake-tana*, « having a sea-monster as an emblem ». Here, however, *makara* seems simply to denote « fish »; in the Oriya versions Makaradhvaja informs Hanumān that his mother was a fish (*mīna*), she is also described as one in the Laotian version¹¹ and in the *Mairāvaṇacarita* Makaradhvaja is named Matsyarāja, « fish-king ». The fish-banner was a familiar device in classical India, Kālidāsa uses it as the basis of an elaborate simile¹²; the reason why this name is given to Hanumān's son (who is never described) seems to be the iconography of the monkey god: in this he is depicted as holding a flag bearing the picture of a fish: a fish banner¹³.

Another problem is posed by the names of the two demons in the Sanskrit versions; the Oriya and Bengali forms appear « Sanskrit » while *mai-* and *ai-rāvaṇa* in the Sanskrit poems should be their regular MIA or NIA derivatives: the demons' names in the NIA versions are archaic. Mahīrāvaṇa¹⁴ can be derived from two sources: *mahī*, « earth », or *mahi*, « great », i.e. Earth-Rāvaṇa or great[er than] Rāvaṇa. The first is preferred by Kṛttibāsa¹⁵. Airāvaṇa is the name of Indra's elephant, more familiarly Airāvata, « produced from the ocean < *irā*, « drinkable fluid, water ». Airāvaṇa is also the name of a *nāga* in the *Mahābhārata* (Monier-Williams). *Ahi* also means « earth » (Apte, *Baṅgiya Śabda Koś*), thus this name could also correspond to « Earth-Rāvaṇa » as well as

8. The demons are slain again and again but come back to life. Airāvaṇa's mistress then tells Hanumān that the demon once saved the lives of some bees, so each time they die the bees, out of gratitude, sprinkle nectar in their blood and they revive. Once he learns this Hanumān kills the bees.

9. It is summarized in KĀMIL BULKE, *Rām Kathā, Utpatti aur Vikās*, Prayag, 1962, §§ 186 & 614.

10. ALEXANDER ZEISENISS, *Die Rāma-Sage bei den Malaiken, ihre Herkunft und Gestaltung*, Hamburg, 1928, p. 93.

11. Here Makaradhvaja's mother is the daughter of the king of the underworld who assumes the form of a fish to investigate the building of the bridge to Laṅkā. SACHCHIDANAND SAHAI, *Rāmāyaṇa in Laos*, Delhi, 1976, p. 24.

12. *Raghuvamśa* VII, 40.

13. K. C. & SUBHASINI ARYAN, *Hanumān in Art and Mythology*, Delhi, 1977, p. 20.

14. In the eastern NIA languages the difference in the length of *i* is lost; in printed texts both Mahī- and Mahi-rāvaṇa appear.

15. *Mahite janmīla nāma se mahīrāvaṇa*, « He was born within the earth, therefore his name is Mahīrāvaṇa ». 1802, Serampore ed., VI, p. 423.

« great[er than] Rāvaṇa » < *ati-rāvaṇa* ¹⁶. Perhaps the most likely explanation would be *ahi* in its common connotation as « serpent », the traditional denizen of the underworld. Were the names Mahī- and Ahi-rāvaṇa only found in the Bengali texts, one could assume that the forms with *mai-* and *ai-* were inherited through the oral tradition and sanskritized into *mahī-* and *ahi-* as this is very frequently done to proper names by the Middle Bengali poets. Yet the « archaic » forms appear in the independent Oriya versions as well as the Gujarati ¹⁷. It is only in the Assamese version of Candra Bhārati that the form Mairāvaṇa appears (as well as Mahīrāvaṇa). Perhaps the popular etymology resulted in a preference for the Sanskrit forms.

The circumstance that both names could have semantically similar sources as well as the confusion of the two demons in the various forms of the episode suggests that originally there was one demon to whom two names were alternately applied ¹⁸; the duplication of the names resulted in the doubling of the demons in the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* where they act as an indistinguishable pair. In the Bengali version the womb demon was renamed Ahirāvaṇa due to the influence of this other tradition while the same figure in the Assamese variant remained unaffected by it and retained his original designation, *garbhāsura*. Elsewhere — as in the Oriya versions and the *Mairāvaṇacarita* — there is a single demon and this probably represents the earlier form of the tale.

If we disregard the secondary motifs clustered around the central story, it stands forth as a starkly simple one: Mahīrāvaṇa kidnaps Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and imprisons them in the underworld with the intention of sacrificing them to the goddess. Hanumān pursues them there, gains entry to the temple and rescues them. The demon is killed. In eastern India two variants of the tale are represented: the Bengali-Assamese dominated by the subplot of Hanumān's struggle with the womb demon ¹⁹, and the Oriya characterized by the appearance of Makaradh-vaja ²⁰. The motif of the womb demon was probably a feature of that oral tradition Kṛttibāsa and Candra Bhārati drew on. A very similar one can be found in the Oriya *Bilāṅkā Rāmāyaṇa* of Siddheśvara Dāsa (attributed popularly to Sāraṇā Dāsa) a popular account of Śītā's slaying

16. In the introduction to his *Rāmākathār Prakītiḥās* (Calcutta, 1977), SUKUMAR SEN, who is apparently unaware of the form of the names in the Sanskrit versions, writes that the « natural Bengali » form of Ahirāvaṇa would be Airāvaṇa and gives this derivation for the « should-be » form.

17. ZIESENIS, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

18. We can note that in the Bombay edition of Tulasidās Rāvaṇa is sometimes called Ahirāvaṇa. *Ibid.*

19. In the Bengali-Assamese we also have the motifs G 526, ogre defeated by feigned ignorance of hero and G 537.1, ogre defeated with help of goddess (after STITH THOMSON and JONAS BALYS, *The Oral Tales of India*, in Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series no. 10, Bloomington, 1958).

20. The Oriya shares the first of the above plus T 549.3, boy born from fish's belly.

of the thousand-headed Rāvaṇa. In one of its episodes Rāma slays Saptasirā, « 7-heads », a general of the thousand-headed Rāvaṇa. When the slain demon's wife learns of his death she weeps and from within her womb her unborn son asks the reason for her tears. When she informs him, he demands that she give him birth so he can avenge his father. When she obliges, he has a further request:

*mātāku boilā beḡe dīa nāma more
nābhīnāra guriāi bandhilā kaṭire
ehā dekhi janani ye harasa hoilā
snehe nābhīdaitya boli nāma tāra delā*²¹

He said to his mother, « give me a name quickly! », and winding his navel string round his waist, tied it. Seeing this his mother was overjoyed. Affectionately she gave him the name Nābhīdaitya, « Navel Demon ».

In both Kṛttibāsa and Candra Bhārati considerable space is devoted to the account of Hanumān's struggle with the womb demon; it occupies almost half the length of the tale in both²².

The Mahīrāvaṇa story is originally a folktale and this accounts for one of its oddities: unlike all the other Rāvaṇas who are characterized by extra heads, Mahīrāvaṇa is never described. He possesses occult abilities but that is all. While the tale has become a part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* cycle, in the eastern Indian versions Rāma's basic role is that of the passive victim. When he does act, he cuts a rather sorry figure; his behavior, in fact, is the reverse of what it is in the more sophisticated medieval *Rāmāyaṇas*: he is not only helpless, but terrified by his predicament:

*kapāḷare haste māri bolanti śrīrāma
poṛu poṛu āmbhara sakala karma dharma
nayanaru lotaka bahai jhara jhara*²³

Beating his forehead with his hand, Rāma says, « fie, fie on my deeds and *dharmas*! ». The tears flow from his eyes in streams.

In the *bhakti* interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Rāma is not merely an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but the supreme world soul. How can he be weeping in terror in his cell? Candra Bhārati anticipates us when he has Hanumān ask Rāma,

*āpuni īśvara hui kene karā bhaya
āpuni sarbbajña prabhu tyajiyo saṁśaya*²⁴

You yourself are god, why are you afraid? You are all-knowing, O Lord, cast away your fears!

21. *Bilaṅkā Ramayana, pūrba khaṇḍa*, Cuttack, 1954, p. 9.

22. In the popular editions of Kṛttibāsa the length is considerably reduced.

23. BIKRAM NARENDRA, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

24. *Mahīrāvaṇa Vadha āru Vetālacanḍi Upākhyāna*, Śrīśivanāth Śarmma Bhaṭṭācāryya, Calcutta, 1908, p. 16.

Commenting on a similar description of Rāma in the *Bicitra Rāmāyaṇa* an Oriya scholar suggests that this unmanly behavior on the part of Rāma is the result of the moral decline and the decay of military morale in Orissa after its conquest by the Moghuls²⁵. Rāma's weakness here does not have to be explained away by theories about the degeneration of the martial spirit of medieval Hindus, rather it is a reflection of the folkish tone of these vernacular *Rāmāyaṇas*, one that could not be extinguished by the subtleties of Vaiṣṇava theology. The protagonists of these popular *Rāmāyaṇas* are neither *bhakti* saints nor Vālmikian heroes. Modern critics, their eyes upon Sanskrit models, often fail to realize this. This particular episode is so patently a product of folklore that it could only have been reinterpreted along *bhakti* lines with the utmost difficulty.

To discover a sectarian backing to this tale we have to look to characters other than Rāma. It has been labeled Tantric and *śākta* by D.C. Sen and later scholars²⁶ because Mahīrāvaṇa abducts Rāma with the intention of offering him as a human sacrifice to the goddess. Her name varies from version to version, but in all she is a malignant form of Devī. In Kṛttibāsa she not only collaborates with Hanuman but she herself is the originator of the plan which leads to Mahīrāvaṇa himself becoming the blood sacrifice:

*caṣera nimiṣe khāṇḍā laila hanūmāna
mahīrāvaṇa kāṭiyā karila duikhāna
khāṇḍā hate kariyā nācē pabananandana
hanūmāna bale rudhira karaḥa bhakṣaṇa...
cule dhari muṇḍa tole yogini rakte udara bhare*²⁷

Within the wink of an eye Hanumān takes the sword and cleaves Mahīrāvaṇa in twain. The son of the wind dances, sword in hand. Hanumān tells (the goddess), « drink the blood!... ». Lifting the head by its hair, Yogini fills her belly with blood.

This scene is followed by lines of praise, *stutis*, to the goddess and in this the story bears some resemblance to *śākta* works like the *Adbhuta-rāmāyaṇa*. This spirit and this elaboration, however, are not common to all versions but are limited to that of Kṛttibāsa and some of his Bengali successors. When individual poets were swayed by sectarian preferences they were more liable to interpret the scene in such a way as to humble the goddess rather than to exalt her. This we can see in the same element as it appears in the Assamese version: Hanumān enters the temple, introduces himself to the goddess and discovers that she is

25. NARENDRA MISRA, *Balarāma Dāsa o Oḍiā Rāmāyaṇa*, Santiniketan, 1955, p. 172.

26. Cf. S. N. SARMA in *op. cit.*, p. 53: « Probably (the tale) was introduced into the regional version by some enthusiastic *śākta* poets to whom Kṛttivāsa and others are indebted ».

27. *Op. cit.*, VI, p. 322. This passage is deleted from popular editions.

his maternal aunt²⁸. Despite the relationship when Hanumān asks her to refrain from the blood of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, she haughtily refuses. Hanumān then resorts to violence:

*betāla caṇḍika lañje meṛhāi dharilā
māthāra upare phurāileka sāta pāka
tamomaya adhakāra dekhāilā devika
maro maro kariyā betāla caṇḍi bole
rāma lakṣmaṇaka bāpu tejilo sakale
nāmara nāmara moka bāpa hanumāna...
phurānte phurānte śruti cetana harila
śateka yojana pathe āchāri pelāi
muṇḍi goṭa ciṇḍi tāi gaila acetana²⁹*

He twined his tail around Vampire Caṇḍī and grasped her, he spun her around over his head seven times. He showed the goddess the inky darkness. Thinking she was about to die Caṇḍi said « I renounced Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, dear, don't kill me, son, O don't kill me Hanumān! »... Twirling around she lost hearing and consciousness and was cast a distance of about 100 *yojanas*. Her head was split open and she fainted.

In the Oriya *Rāmāyaṇas*, and even the Bengali one of Jagadrām, this same rough treatment is meted out to the goddess. Here the tone is the opposite of *śākta*: the terrible goddess is subdued with ridiculous ease by Hanumān. In versions from outside our area Hanumān merely takes the shape of the image in the temple; the goddess herself does not appear. How the goddess is treated — glorified, humiliated or ignored — does not depend on any intrinsic element in the story, but on the sectarian inclinations of the individual poet. As far as the goddess is concerned, it is neutral; what can be considered « Tantric » or « *śākta* » in it is the circumstance that one of the pivots of the action is the intended human sacrifice of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. In this it is no more Tantric than, for example, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* which also takes place in an occult atmosphere and features a human sacrifice foiled at the last moment and Bhavabhūti, we know, clearly had little sympathy for either his Kāpālīka characters or their ideals.

Mahīrāvaṇa certainly possesses occult abilities; he changes himself into various human shapes in his attempt to gain entry to Rāma's camp then puts all asleep with a magic spell, but if any of the characters in this story are to be seen as occult or Tantric, that label must fall on Hanumān. To guard the camp against the demon he inflates his body to an enormous size, in his pursuit of the demon he takes the form of

28. *Māvara bhaginī*. Hanumān's mother is Añjanā, an *apsaras* cursed to be reborn as an ape. This must be a local tradition.

29. CANDRA BHĀRATI, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

a fly, a crow, a hare, a mote of dust and even of the goddess herself. When she refuses to aid him, he assumes his terrible form and crushes her underfoot:

*bhīṣmarūpa dhailā se pabana kumara
bāma gora neīna debīra śīra delā
krodhabhara hoinase taḷaku cāpilā
mahābhayaṅkara helā pabana suta
sahasreka bhuja teja dvitīya āditya*³⁰

The son of the wind took his terrible form, taking his left foot, he placed it on the head of Devi. Filled with rage, he crushed her down. The son of the wind became dread-inspiring, the splendour of his thousand arms a second sun.

It is obvious that we are not dealing here with the traditional epic monkey hero or the ideal devotee of Rāma but with that Hanumān who was a Tantric deity in his own right, an aspect of his less familiar than the others. As such he is considered a manifestation of *śakti* and as such worshipped in one-headed, five-headed and eleven-headed forms³¹. In the epitome of the *Rāmāyaṇa* found in the *Bṛhaddharma-pūraṇa* Hanumān meets the tutelary goddess of Laṅkā and is asked to take on this terrible form to prove his identity:

*ityuktaḥ sa tadā vīraḥ kāmārūpo' anilātmajaḥ
babhūva bhīṣaṇākāro vyāvṛtākṣo mahāmukhaḥ
dadarśa tasya kāye sā śarīrāṇi ca rakṣasām
nakhadantāgralagnāni koṭīśaḥ koṭīlakṣaśaḥ
tathākārān mahābhīmān lomasandhiṣu vānarān
śīrṣe tasya dhanuṣpāṇim navadūrvādalaprabham
mahāvalam mahāsattvaṃ rāmaṃ kamalalocanam*³²

After he said this the hero, the son of the wind, able to assume any form at will, took his terrible form, huge-mouthed with spinning eyes. (The goddess) saw on his body the corpses of demons attached to the tips of his nails in hundreds of millions; and between the hairs on his body terrible apes of the same shape; and on his head Rāma, the lotus-eyed, bow in hand, gleaming like a patch of new *dūrvā* grass, of great might, noble.

Another manifestation of this bloodthirsty, Tantric aspect of the ape god has been seen in the passage given earlier which describes Hanumān offering the severed head of the demon to Yogini. A passage from the *Dāṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa* of Baḷarāma Dāsa describing Hanumān's

30. BIŚVANĀTHA KHUNTĪĀ, *Biśi Rāmāyaṇa bā Bicitra Rāmāyaṇa*, Dharmagrantha Stores, Cuttack, n.d., p. 171. Cf. BIKRAMA NARENDRA, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

31. K. C. ARYAN, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

32. *Pūrvakhaṇḍa* 18, 24-26, ed. by P. Tarkaratna, Calcutta, B.S. 1314.

slaying of Rāvaṇa's son Akṣaya is very similar and far more explicit:

*chedilā śira dhailā āṇi bāmakare
dakṣiṇa bhujare dhariachi tikṣṇaśare
sehi maṛā māri bīra basilāka yahum
mahārudra prāye bīra diśilāka tahum...
hanumata achai bhairaba rūpa dhari
ugra mūrṭti grahiṇa ye bīra ubhā hoi
daitara śiraku kharaga tale thoi*³³

He cut off (Akṣaya's) head, picked it up and held it in his left hand, in his right hand he holds the sharp sword. As he sat, pressing down that corpse, the hero appeared like Mahārudra... Hanumān has taken the form of Bhairava. He stands, having assumed a terrible form, having put the head of the demon beneath his sword.

Here Hanumān is the sacrificer, the terrible Bhairava, Mahārudra, terms used for the malignant aspect of Śiva. The mere fact that he bears a sword in his hand is highly unusual; everywhere the monkey heroes are described as employing uprooted trees, mountains, their fists or nails as weapons. Thus it is this aspect, the terrible one, of Hanumān which is emphasized in the Mahārāvaṇa tale.

Finally we can turn to another side of this complex deity which is emphasized in the Bengali and Assamese versions of the tale: that of the wrestling god. Hanumān is the patron deity of wrestlers, a role very prominent in this sport today, for Indian wrestlers shout out his name as they close with their opponents³⁴. The womb demon, we note, does not have the extra limbs or huge size usually associated with the epic demons, nor does he wield the fabulous weapons they are presented as using: he is undescribed and emerges from the womb costumed and ready for a wrestling match:

*garbbapāta haila chāoyāla pare bhumitale
takhani ūthila chāoyāla bandhiyā kāmākāle
mālasāṭa māre bīra caturddiga nehāle*³⁵

The boy was born and falls to the ground. Right away the child rose up and girded his loins. He shouts a challenge and looks in all directions.

Clad in a loincloth, the womb demon shouts out a *mālasāṭa*, a challenge issued by a wrestler to an opponent. One notes that in the elaborate account of this match, Hanumān finds the demon very difficult to overcome and is only able to defeat and kill him with the help of his father the wind god: Vāyu blows dust in the demon's eyes blinding

33. Gobindaratha edition, Cuttack, 1914, V, p. 46.

34. K. C. ARYAN, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

35. KṚTIBĀSA, *op. cit.*, VI, p. 324.

him and grit on his body, enabling Hanumān to get a grip on and throw him. These are well-known (and presumably allowable) wrestler's tricks.

Hanumān is the central figure of the Mahīrāvaṇa tale in all its manifestations; he is its hero, its center and its theme, thus it is with justice that the *Mahīrāvaṇacarita* has an alternate title: *Hanūmadvijaya*, *The Victory of Hanumān*. The Mahīrāvaṇa story thus belongs to the non-devotional folk literature centered around the person of Hanumān. Many such apocryphal episodes were incorporated into the vernacular *Rāmāyaṇas*, others were given independent treatment. The latter type of literature is especially rich in Assam where besides the *Mahīrāvaṇa Vadha*, we have the *Gaṇakacaritra* of Dhanañjaya, the *Pātālī Kāṇḍa* of Vidyāpañcānana, and the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and *Satruñjaya* of Raghunātha Mahanta. The last three works deal with Hanumān's battles in the underworld with various *nāgas* and are not only non-Vālmikian but apparently have no counterparts in any other Indian literature. All testify to the enormous popularity of this complex deity.